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The History Of The Shadow

It was 1930. Street & Smith had long been publishing a pulp magazine entitled Street & Smith's Detective Story, and due to competition, sales were starting to slip a bit. The publishers thought up what appeared to be a brilliant marketing scheme: radio was becoming more and more popular; why not develop a radio show that adapted stories from Detective Story, thus marketing the magazine itself? David Christman (of the Ruthrauff and Ryan ad agency) and Bill Sweets (a radio writer) were given the task of adapting the pulp to radio. They came up with the idea of a mysterious narrator, and Harry Engman Charlot, Sweets' assistant came up with the narrator's name: "The Shadow." James La Curto was cast as the actor to portray The Shadow, and it first aired on July 31, 1930, entitled Street & Smith's Detective Story Hour. After only a few shows, La Curto left to perform on Broadway and he was replaced with Frank Readick. Ah, this would get the public flocking to the stands clamoring for the Detective Story magazine! But to the publisher's surprise, this is not at all what happened. Sure, people were flocking to newsstands with demands, but they were demanding the Shadow magazine! Which, of course, did not exist!

Street & Smith quickly realized they had a potential problem; they had no copyright on the character and there were plenty of people out there interested in him. They had to get out a magazine and do it quick, or someone would take the character and there would not be a whole lot they could do about it. There literally was no time to waste!

At this time, Walter Gibson, a journalist and author, specializing in magic (among other things, including exposing fake occultists) and who had ghost written books for Thurston and Houdini, happened to be in New York. He had come to look into doing a sequel to an earlier book on Houdini that he had written, and prior to leaving, decided to stop off at Street & Smith to visit Frank Blackwell (the Detective Story magazine's editor). This decision would change Gibson's life and in many ways and would affect the future of many fictional characters and the entire pulp magazine industry. At this point, he had no inkling that he was about to embark on an authorship of 283 Shadow novels. While there, Blackwell mentioned that they were thinking of reentering the character pulp field (they had previously published Nick Carter), and Gibson, who already had some ideas he was thinking of using for a mystery novel, seemed like a logical choice, being someone who could write well and meet the near-immediate deadline. He accepted the task, and rushed off to begin a 70,000 word novel.

After completing a handful of chapters (which included the creation of a character who would be kept from committing suicide by The Shadow at the start -- a man named Harry Vincent whose name was a marriage of two characters from Horatio Algiers' "Risen From the Ranks": Harry Walton and Oscar Vincent), Gibson took them and an outline back to Street & Smith and Lon Murray, who would initially serve as the magazine's editor. Murrary was shortly replaced by John L. Nanovic as editor, who was originally the assistant editor. At this point, Gibson discovered that the cover to be used was resurrected from the Street & Smith files, was from the October 1, 1919 issue of Thrill Book, and showed a frightened Chinese man. OK, now he would have to inject a Chinatown element into the story. At least it was early enough in the writing to make this relatively simple to accomplish. Upon its finish, a pseudoname had to be derived for Gibson to write under. Again, using the notion of marrying names known to him, Gibson began looking at magic dealers that he had contact with. He settled on a combination of Maxwell Holden and U.F. Grant, thus, Maxwell Grant. That first well-written novel, originally titled "Murder in the Next Room" and changed to "The Living Shadow" was released, and Gibson was assigned to continue writing The Shadow, with the magazine planned for a quarterly release.

To publicize the magazine's release, Street & Smith began a contest in Detective Story and on the radio show with a $1000 prize. The concept? Describe what The Shadow looks like. The winning entry ended up not really being used by Gibson. Included in the description was that The Shadow had a cobra tattooed on his chest. However, throughout the early novels are references to The Shadow as being a radio announcer in addition to smashing crime. The tie-in; the cross-promotion.

With the second novel, Gibson was faced with coming up with the name of an alter ego for The Shadow, although in this case, the alter ego would be someone that The Shadow impersonated, not his true self. He searched for a name and came upon Baille Cranston in some of Houdini's notes. He liked the name Cranston, but frankly, "Baille" would have to go. He finally came up with the name "Lamont" by going through the alphabet and thinking of two syllable names beginning with each letter. Gibson continued writing and began turning out one novel a month, keeping well ahead of the quarterly schedule. Shortly, sales were going so well, it was switched to a monthly, which did not phase Gibson at all. He was well ahead of the game. However, in March 1932, he was given a contract to produce two Shadow novels a month! Accepting the challenge, Gibson began to write - and write like mad to keep up. Amazingly, he was capable of not only keeping up, but further authoring some of the best-written novels of the character pulp lines (OK, with a few exceptions).

The first year's novels built up The Shadow's arsenal of agents and provided more and more hints as to who he really was. All during this time, the radio show continued to exist, but going through a few changes in name and network. Always, The Shadow was an announcer (click here for a list of the different incarnations of the show). The most notable name and format change being in 1931-32 when The Shadow became the host for "Street & Smith's Love Story Hour!"

In 1936, a new author came on the scene, but readers would not know about it. Writing under the name of Maxwell Grant as well, Theodore Tinsley was contracted to write a handuful of Shadow novels. Why? For multiple reasons. First, due to the pending release of a radio show with The Shadow as the lead character, scripts had to be planned between Nanovic and Gibson. Secondly, Street & Smith was planning the release of Clues Detective Magazine, and Gibson was to write Norgil the Magician (a magician-detective) stories for it. Third, Gibson did not completely stop his writing in other areas while writing The Shadow, and an occasional break would allow him to concentrate on character development while Tinsley wrote the actual novels. Tinsley, experienced in writing more violent pulp stories than Gibson churned out, would prove valuable in that sense as well. As the competitors' pulp novels grew more violent (the leader in this being The Spider), some "Bloody Shadows" were deemed necessary, and Tinsley was the guy to produce them. His first was "Partners of Peril." The arrangement worked so well, Tinsley would go on to produce four Shadow novels a year for the next six years, for a total of 27 novels.

But this all was building up to the big year, 1937. Many things to alter The Shadow would occur this year! First, the decision was made that The Shadow needed his own radio show, where he would be the lead character, and the stories could be adaptations of the pulps (the adaptation idea did not last long). Blue Coal was the sponsor, having previously sponsored a show with the character in 1931-32 and 32-35. In fact, The Shadow was off the air from 1935-37 due to a dispute between Street & Smith and Blue Coal - Blue Coal wanted the character to remain an announcer and Street & Smith wanted the character to be the lead in his own series. Obviously, in 1937, Street & Smith finally proved their point, convincing Blue Coal. Young Orson Welles was contracted to portray The Shadow, while Agnes Moorehead would introduce a new character, Margot Lane, a semi-love interest. The first episode in this format, "The Death House Rescue," aired on September 26, 1937. The radio series would be so popular, it would continue on until 1954, spanning nearly two decades and a host of other actors (click here to see a list and what other shows these actors did). The phrase, "The Shadow Knows" became firmly embedded in American pop culture history, although this dated back to the early days when The Shadow was a narrator. During World War II, it is said that references to The Shadow were occasionally used as passwords. Even today, many who have never heard or read The Shadow know to what the phrase refers.

Furthermore, in 1937, "The Shadow Strikes" was released in theaters. Previously, The Shadow had introduced six short films in 1931, but this was the first feature in which The Shadow was the main character. This starred Rod LaRocque in and was loosely based on the Shadow novel "The House That Vanished." This was a rather slow and confusing entry. Other films followed, including LaRocque in International Crime (1938), and the well-done serial "The Shadow," with Victor Jory (1940). Six years were to pass before further film entries, and these were to star Kane Richmond (from Spy Smasher, among others). In 1946, Monogram released The Shadow Returns, Behind the Mask, and The Missing Lady, all of which are fairly painful to watch. Again, after 12 years, The Shadow returned in 1958 with Richard Derr in the title role in the film "Invisible Avenger" (aka. "Bourbon Street Shadows"), a particularly boring and painful entry by Republic Pictures.

Also in August of 1937, the long awaited (and publicized) novel, "The Shadow Unmasks" was published. In this, the "true" identity of The Shadow is revealed. Understanding that in the second novel, The Shadow "arranged" with the real Lamont Cranston to assume his identity, readers did not know who he really was. But this changed in "The Shadow Unmasks," in which it was revealed he was, in fact, Kent Allard, an aviator. The Allard role would be used fairly extensively for the following few years, and then gradually fade again.

In 1940, The Shadow hit the comics. In newspaper comic strips, Gibson adapted some of the novels, while Vernon Green provided the art. Sadly, due to the war (for the most part), the strip lasted roughly two years. However, the comic book, also started in 1940 (and in 1941 featured a compilation of some of the newspaper strips). The first issue featured the cover to "Dead Men Live" (the pulp cover, that is) and all covers and stories were picked out by Gibson and Nanovic, with Gibson then adapting them. The comic book also featured Doc Savage, The Avenger, Nick Carter, Frank Merriwell and a host of others. Gibson continued to work on The Shadow comic scripts until 1947.

Fast forward to the next major change in 1941 with the publication of "The Thunder King." In the first paragraph, a new character is introduced to the pulp. Well, not exactly introduced... a new character is just there - Margo Lane (with the "t" dropped from Margot). Taken from the radio show (undoubtedly due to its success), she finally showed up in the pulp, and was fairly similar to the radio Margo, in that s he would constantly be getting into trouble. Many fans of the pulp would vehemently react to the introduction of the character, particularly shown in the readers' letters columns of the time, but she stuck. She eventually would become fairly useful to The Shadow, in her ability to mix with the upper social set, but this did take awhile.

The year 1943 could be viewed as a bad year as far as The Shadow was concerned. With the April issue, The Shadow reverted to a monthly, partly due to war-inspired paper shortages. Those same shortages caused other problems at Street & Smith, ultimately leading to staff reductions, including the firing of John L. Nanovic, after The Shadow had prospered under his editorialship for 12 years. Furthermore, under the new editor Charles Moran, the pulp shrank to digest size, thus shrinking the size of the novels. This caused Gibson's work to change, in that he would have to jump immediately into a story with little introduction, and due to less room, less description of characters and events became a necessity.

Moran did not last long, but managed to make clear that the novels needed to be more realistic; no more odd villains, no more supercriminals. He was replaced by William de Grouchy, who also left after a short period and he was replaced by Babette Rosmond. Under Rosmond, The Shadow novels were moved to the back of the magazine. Also during this time, odd things apparently began to occur. Lester Dent was asked if he would take on the task of writing The Shadow and Doc Savage. Similarly, Gibson was asked if he would write both. Neither assented, of course. Finally, in contract negotiations in late 1945, things

came to a head. Street & Smith did not assert that Gibson was the creator of The Shadow in this contract, and it appeared that they wanted him to sign away his rights to the character. Gibson heartily resisted and was summarily fired.

Bruce Elliott replaced Gibson as Maxwell Grant. Elliott, who had worked with Gibson in the past (they had originally met because Elliott was also involved with magic) and had done some of the scripts for pieces in The Shadow comics (Doc Savage, for one), turned out fairly decent mystery novels, but they were not like the rest of the novels readers were accustomed to. Elliott utilized many mystery novel conventions, and was particularly good at it, but again, this was not The Shadow that longtime readers were used to. More importantly, the novels concentrated on Cranston as opposed to The Shadow, who often rarely appeared in them. In 1948, Rosmond resigned and DeGrouchy returned as editor. With sales slumping, DeGrouchy again approached Gibson, with the intention of bringing The Shadow back to its former format and, thus, financial glory. After fifteen Elliott novels, Walter Gibson returned, writing The Shadow with a vigor long since gone from the series, and the magazine again published quarterly. With this return came a new editor, Daisy Bacon. Sadly, this "revival" only lasted six more issues before the title was dropped by Street & Smith, which was heading in the direction of publishing pure "slicks," closing with the novel "The Whispering Eyes," the Summer, 1949 issue.

In 1963, 14 years later, Belmont Books was talking of reprinting original Shadow novels and Gibson was contracted to write a new story, "The Return of The Shadow" to kick off this string of reprints. Things did not go as planned and Belmont ended up publishing the first draft of this story (much to Gibson's dismay) and never did reprint any novels. Instead, they contracted with Dennis Lynds to write original stories, which resulted in The Shadow being portrayed as more of an international spy, somewhat fittingly in that Lynds also wrote stories for The Man From UNCLE digest (as an interesting note, Gibson wrote an UNCLE story entitled "The Coin of El Diablo Affair" for Wonder Books, marketed primarily to a younger audience).

During the 1960's, the radio show was revived, partly due to a general nostalgia craze sweeping the nation. This opened the door to renewed interest in the character which carried over into the 1970's. The result of this was a host of reprints of original Shadow novels (most in paperback format) and other items of note (including a line of toys manufactured by Madison Industries). In 1966, Gibson was involved in the issuance of the hardback, "The Weird Adventures of The Shadow," (published by Grossett and Dunlap), featuring abridged versions of three Shadow novels. A few years later, in 1969, Tempo books re-published the abridged version of "Grove of Doom" which appeared in "The Weird Adventures of The Shadow." In 1975, a fantastic facsimile reprint of :The Crime Oracle" and "Teeth of the Dragon" was published by Dover. Of the paperbacks, Bantam originally reprinted 7 of the pulps, followed by Pyramid, who issued a series of reprints, and finally, in the mid-seventies, Jove also published some. Following the paperback reprints, Doubleday issued three hardbound books for its Crime Club book club, each containing two Shadow novels each (most being mid-1940's ' novels). In 1984, Mysterious Press published "The Shadow and The Golden Master," which reprinted, in facsimile form, the first two (of three) Shiwan Khan novels.

Also in the 1970's, Gibson wrote a short Shadow story entitled "The Riddle of the Rangoon Ruby," intended to be published in serialized format in newspapers. With this series in mind, he followed with a story titled "Blackmail Bay." The newspaper series never transpired, and the former was published in "The Shadow Scrapbook," while the latter appeared in "The Duende History of The Shadow Magazine."

The comics medium was not overlooked either. In 1964, Archie comics published a Shadow comic that ran eight issues. It is notably bad, and The Shadow only appears in the guise most know him as on the cover of the first issue. No comics appeared after that for eight more years, at which point DC began to publish a rather good series, with Michael Kaluta artwork. The DC series ran 12 issues, including one in which The Avenger met The Shadow. As a spinoff, The Shadow appeared in two Batman issues as well during this time. In one, he mostly observes Batman on a case, driving him a bit mad with his incessant laughter, originating seemingly from nowhere. At the end of this, the two characters meet, and Batman admits to having always been a fan.

The Shadow would not reappear in comics until 1986, with the Howard Chaykin miniseries, which further spawned a 19-issue series, and was an attempt to update The Shadow. From the perspective of the character The Shadow and style of the original pulps, it is horrible. It did include the use of Shiwan Khan and Benedict Stark, but most Shadow fans feel it veers too far off the track of what the character was/is. However, the original Chaykin miniseries does feature fantastic articles by Anthony Tollin in the back of three of the four issues. This makes it worthwhile to own them, if for no other reason. In 1988, Eternity published a 13 issue series entitled "Crime Classics" which is a fantastic collection, reprinting Shadow newspaper strips from the 1940's. Then one year later, in 1989, DC issued The Shadow Strikes, a series that ran 31 issues and was far more true to the character. It also was set in the appropriate time period and featured a few adaptations of original novels (including Death's Harlequin, a Tinsley novel). The art in it is fantastic (and it was colored by noted Shadow historian Anthony Tollin), and the stories are quite compelling as well. Finally, in 1993, Dark Horse comics picked up the rights and then produced "The Shadow and the Mysterious Three," "In the Coils of Leviathan" and "Hells' Heatwave." The artwork in these is fantastic, but the stories are utterly confusing, at least to me. Of note, Kaluta was involved in the authoring of them.

So The Shadow has sustained. He has even surfaced in the guise of the 1994 Alec Baldwin film (somewhat of a disaster, but at least that keeps in line with the majority of The Shadow's appearances on the film screen). Who knows what may come next (pun not intended)? It is unlikely the character will permanently disappear at any time soon, given that sometimes long periods of time have previously passed with nothing appearing on The Shadow. But he always seems to come back. He is entrenched in our pop culture history and can be expected to have that history extended in the future. It's just a matter of time.

As a final note, Walter Gibson died on Friday, December 6, 1985, just months after his 88th birthday and reportedly on the verge of writing a new Shadow novel.

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Info Taken From http://www.ulink.net/~lurch/pulp/shadow.html

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